

# Russell and the pacifists

by Thomas C. Kennedy

Jo Vellacott. *Bertrand Russell and the Pacifists in the First World War*. Brighton: Harvester Press; New York: Macmillan, 1980. £28.50; US\$25.00.

WHATEVER ELSE IT accomplishes, this carefully written, meticulously documented study will finally sweep away any surviving vestiges of the idea that Bertrand Russell's opposition to the Great War was merely a fastidious and self-righteous exercise in political amateurism.<sup>1</sup> Taking as her theme a passage from *Principles of Social Reconstruction* in which Russell declared that an harmonious blending of "instinct, mind and spirit" were "essential to a full life", Professor Vellacott reveals how Russell's wartime experiences helped him to better balance these elements in his own life. But Russell's activity was much more than self-indulgent striving for personal growth. The evidence amassed here makes it abundantly clear that much of what Russell did during the war years was vital to the entire war-resistance movement. Furthermore, between March 1916 and May 1918 Russell made impressive contributions not only to the day to day operation but even to the survival of one of the most important anti-war groups in British history, the No-Conscription Fellowship (NCF).

In 1914 Russell had already established himself as an intellectual giant, but he was only beginning to discover, largely through his relationship with Ottoline Morrell, the importance of passion and spiritual belief in his life. He was also politically naive in the manner of the nineteenth-century liberal who saw reason as the chief influence on human affairs and the expansion of freedom as the chief objective of civilized nations. The "pacifism" he professed was little more than a vague assertion that war was irrational and therefore unthinkable to rational men. Vellacott's brief portrait of this slightly priggish academic creature provides an interesting contrast to the older, wiser, and, in her view, better Russell of 1918.

Russell's opposition to the war was absolute; he was convinced that it was destructive of all the values that gave meaning to human existence.

<sup>1</sup> See, for example, Keith Robbins, *The Abolition of War: The "Peace Movement" in Britain, 1914-1919* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1976), pp. 86-9 and *passim*.

During the early months of the conflict, however, he could find no outlet that provided sufficient scope for his protest. He did join with E. D. Morel, Ramsay MacDonald, Norman Angell and others in the Union of Democratic Control (UDC) and Vellacott indicates that he was more deeply involved with that organization than has been previously recognized. But the Liberal internationalists of the UDC, cautious lest they be thought subversive, moved too slowly for Russell. Even the pacifists he encountered were, to his thinking, an "awful crew", lacking the "wildness" (p. 23) necessary for a meaningful anti-war movement. Only in the No-Conscription Fellowship did Russell discover a body of war-resisters whose "wildness" could match the patriotic enthusiasm of those who supported the war.

Vellacott believes that Russell's somewhat delayed decision to "make friends with the No-Conscription people"<sup>2</sup> was one of the decisive acts of his life. Not only did it begin the process by which he turned "from an irritating but respectable academic into 'one of the most mischievous cranks in the country'" (p. 100), but it also indicated his willingness "to swallow socialism for the sake of peace" (p. 15). The intellectual turmoil Russell experienced in embracing a collectivist ideology is a key issue to which the author repeatedly returns.

Russell abandoned Liberalism because he believed that the Liberal Government, with the acquiescence of many of Britain's staunchest liberals, was engaged in the process of undermining all of the values it supposedly embodied—and which he still held dear. His search for a viable political alternative resulted in a series of lectures, partially stimulated by his brief, stormy friendship with D. H. Lawrence, which were later published as *Principles of Social Reconstruction*. In the midst of this work, Russell began to see the No-Conscription Fellowship and the young socialists who dominated it as offering real hope for the future of civilization. Indeed, the NCF seemed to him almost an incarnation of the ideas he was expressing in *Principles of Social Reconstruction*. Thus, after the imposition of conscription Russell joined both the NCF and the Independent Labour Party (ILP) in order to be in the front ranks of the struggle for human freedom and dignity.

The irony of all this was, of course, that the triumph of socialism for which Russell ostensibly began to strive implied the sort of state control over the individual that he detested. Russell resolved this dilemma, temporarily at least, in *Roads to Freedom* by opting for the compromise of guild socialism. Nonetheless, Vellacott takes pains to indicate that Russell was always an uneasy collectivist who "had too much liberal baggage

to travel far on the socialist tram" (p. 248). The logic of his situation forced him to adopt socialism; but, as Vellacott notes, if intellectually he was "an international socialist ... [e]motionally and methodologically ... he was still ... a liberal ..." (p. 169).

Whatever his ultimate reservations about socialism, Russell, in the spring of 1916, threw nearly all his energy into the fight against conscription and the war. His enthusiasm for the cause and his admiration for the young conscientious objectors with whom he came into contact lifted his spirits enormously. As he told Ottoline Morrell in April 1916: "I can't describe ... how happy I am having these men to work with and for—it is *real* happiness all day long" (p. 51). The associations Russell developed through the NCF had a significant impact on his life, especially his friendship with NCF chairman Clifford Allen (Russell first met Constance Malleson at Allen's hearing in the Lavender Hill police court) and his working relationship with Catherine E. Marshall, an amazing woman whom Vellacott has at last lifted from undeserved obscurity.

In Catherine Marshall, Vellacott has not only a foil to Bertrand Russell but a genuine heroine of whom much more should be heard. Furthermore, Marshall contributed materially to this study by preserving her papers in the provincial fastness of her native Cumberland where they lay in total disarray until Dr. Vellacott discovered them in the late 1960s. Using these papers (now deposited in the Cumbria Record Office) to supplement material from the Russell and other archives, Vellacott presents a series of new discoveries and insights ranging from fascinating, if minor, historical details to a major revelation on the part played by Russell and the NCF in attempting to organize a meaningful pacifist response to the first Russian Revolution. Vellacott reveals, for example, that an odd little conclave between NCF leaders (Allen, Russell, Marshall) and Lloyd George took place two weeks after the date generally assigned to it. We also learn that Russell was not only a ghost-writer for Mrs. Henry Hobhouse's famous plea on behalf of C. O.s, '*I Appeal Unto Caesar*',<sup>3</sup> but probably wrote part of Reverend F. B. Meyer's pamphlet, *The Majesty of Conscience*, as well. In addition, Vellacott presents evidence to support her admittedly speculative conclusion that, contrary to recently published accounts,<sup>4</sup> the NCF does deserve major credit for rescuing the thirty-four conscientious objectors sent to France and condemned to be shot. Most significant, however, is the author's account of

<sup>3</sup> See Vellacott's article, "Russell as Ghost-Writer", *Russell*, no. 15 (Autumn 1974): 19–23.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. John Rae, *Conscience and Politics* (London: Oxford University Press, 1970), pp. 151–6.

<sup>2</sup> *Autobiography*, II (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1968): 52.

the "Charter of Freedom" campaign—largely organized by Russell and Marshall on behalf of the NCF—to press for the release of imprisoned C. O.s and full restoration of British civil liberties in emulation of the Russian Provisional Government. The culmination of this effort was a protest meeting at the Albert Hall attended by 12,000 people (5,000 more were supposedly turned away), which gave ample testimony of strong anti-war sentiments. Vellacott believes that this rally, as well as the enthusiastic reception given Russell during his tour of South Wales for the NCF in 1916, reveal "a section of public opinion apparently quite disaffected from the Government's civil policies and the continuation of the war ..." (p. 158). Nearly all previous accounts of public attitudes have emphasized general public support for the war effort and deep public resentment over the stand of conscientious objectors. Vellacott's evidence is not yet sufficient to overturn the traditional view, but it certainly offers incentive for a new line of historical investigation.

Since Russell worked for the NCF on a nearly day to day basis for the better part of two years, a considerable portion of Vellacott's study necessarily deals with his part in directing operations, developing policies and bearing burdens for the Fellowship. In attempting to carry out these tasks, Russell came to depend on Catherine Marshall for guidance, just as she leaned on him for support. Unfortunately, their working partnership began to deteriorate under the pressure of overwork, criticism and official harassment. They quarrelled seriously and, though they were eventually reconciled, Marshall was forced to retire after a complete breakdown and Russell's resignation as acting chairman owed at least something to their difficulties.

In presenting her account of Russell's career with the NCF, Vellacott rightly emphasizes the fact that if Russell had merely held his opinions without publicly acting upon them, all of his brushes with the establishment could have been avoided. If he had agreed with General Cockerill at the War Office that conscience was a "still small voice" and that a proper sense of humour required that he acquiesce in the slaughter of the Western Front, he would not have been twice tried and convicted; he would not have lost his position at Trinity College; he would not have been denied a passport or banned from speaking in certain places; he would not have been imprisoned. The point cannot be overstated that oftentimes those who receive credit for being moderate and "reasonable" are those who remain silent in the face of horrors they ought to condemn. "Unreasonable" men speak out and are themselves condemned.

On the other hand, Vellacott points up the fact that, in a personal sense, Russell gained a great deal from his wartime experience, acquiring a capacity for tolerance and compassion that stood in stark contrast to the

acerbic absoluteness of the pre-war years. In the NCF Russell discovered people whom he could not rightly denounce even when they disagreed with him, and he witnessed suffering by conscientious objectors that threatened not so much physical pain as moral collapse. These novel experiences had a profound influence on him and effected considerable changes in him. Thus, the academic philosopher who had insisted upon the singularity of moral rectitude was the NCF's most understanding and flexible peacemaker in the often bitter disputes between the Fellowship's absolutist and alternativist factions; and the icy figure who could not be moved by his first wife's pleas for affection, took time to give advice and succor to the least of those suffering for conscience's sake.

Vellacott insists that the eventual disillusionment Russell felt about his wartime activities must in our time be tempered by the knowledge that he actually accomplished a good deal more than he gave himself credit for, and by the realization that for all of Russell's sense of isolation, his stand with the pacifists did, in fact, bring him closer to other human beings than he had ever been before.

*Bertrand Russell and the Pacifists* is an outstanding contribution not only to Russell studies but to our understanding of the No-Conscription Fellowship, the British peace movement and, indeed, the state of British society during the war. But despite the fact that Dr. Vellacott's scholarship is nearly always flawless, her judgments consistently sound and her analysis highly insightful, the book is not without its faults. One of these is most assuredly not of the author's doing and is perhaps chiefly a matter of taste, but I believe many readers will agree that the procedure for footnoting is exceedingly trying. Vellacott's citations, which are both extensive and informative, are not only placed at the back of the volume but all 811 of them are numbered consecutively without any breaks; the imagination is blindly staggering by the time one reaches n. 597! There are also minor proofreading errors (pp. 30, 193) and one misidentification (p. 93). In addition, it is not clear if the use of "Larking" in one quotation (p. 21) is a mistake in transcription or Russell's original error. The text of the quote surely indicates that "Larking" is the Irish labour leader James Larkin. But these are minor matters. There is another, more substantial criticism.

Dr. Vellacott freely admits her sympathy for Bertrand Russell but does not hesitate to criticize him for poor judgment or insensitive behaviour. This is as it should be. There are times, however, when Vellacott reveals a disconcerting tendency to justify, by intellectual or philosophical argument, actions of Russell's which can at best be defended on practical or realistic grounds. Russell's nearly panicky attempt to gain imprisonment in the first rather than the second division is a case

in point. Vellacott seems to vindicate Russell's special pleading on the grounds that since he had largely given up his pacifist work, his imprisonment no longer served the cause of peace and therefore could be justifiably mitigated. Certainly, one can understand why Russell would wish to escape the rigours of the second division. But his success at doing so, with the connivance of influential friends, was clearly an example of someone taking advantage of his class and family position in order to be served by a prison system which reflected all the class-oriented ideas he condemned. Russell, like all human beings, could at times be less than inspiring. On the other hand, this book should inspire considerable admiration, for it serves both its subject and its readers extremely well.

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